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School Meals for All in California: Financial Benefits for Families

Research Brief • April 2026

BACKGROUND

California's School Meals for All (SMFA) program launched in the 2022–23 school year, following federal pandemic relief efforts that provided universal school meals across the US from 2020–22.[1] Traditionally, school meal eligibility has been income-based: children from families at or below 130% of the federal poverty level (FPL) received free meals; those at 131–185% FPL qualified for reduced-price meals; and families above 185% FPL paid full price.[2] In 2026, a family of four needs to make less than $41,795 to qualify for federal free meals, and less than $59,478 to qualify for federal reduced-price meals.

In 2023, the Nutrition Policy Institute (NPI) surveyed 842 California public school parents to assess SMFA's early financial impacts on families. The sample reflected the geographical, racial/ethnic, and income diversity of California's public school population, with equal representation across elementary, middle, and high school parents. Additionally, 21 qualitative interviews were carried out among parents selected to represent diverse family incomes. Both for the survey and interviews, families were classified on the following income groups based on federal eligibility criteria:

- Families eligible for free meals (at or below 130% FPL)
- Reduced-price eligible families (between 131% and 185% FPL)
- Near-eligible families (186% - 300% FPL)
- Higher income families (above 300% FPL)

SMFA SAVES FAMILIES MONEY

Surveyed parents reported meaningful financial relief from the SMFA program across all income levels, with no statistically significant differences between income groups.

79%

of all parents agreed that school meals save their family money

Results differ slightly across income groups, with the highest rate of affirmative experience of savings coming from reduced-price eligible families (82%). 77% of families eligible for free meals reported savings and 78 % of non-eligible families agreed the program saves them money.

"It does save a significant amount of money for our household because we have two kids…it used to be $5 a day and so it's $10 a day for [two] kids, so that does cut a lot of costs for food…especially with grocery bills are so much higher too." — Parent of middle school student, Placer County

FINANCIAL VULNERABILITY IF SMFA ENDS

55%

of all parents said household finances would be hurt if SMFA ended

When asked to consider what would happen if SMFA were discontinued, most parents **(55%)** across income groups expressed concern:

- **57%** of near-eligible families anticipated financial harm, reflecting the needs of families who fall just above federal eligibility thresholds.
- Even among non-eligible families, **36%** anticipated financial harm, highlighting the broad range of California families benefiting from SMFA.

"I don't know if they're going to keep free lunch for everybody, but I think… it's hard out there. Sometimes even the working class, like myself, they think that because we have a job, we can afford all these things and it's hard. I don't qualify for any services out there and I'm doing it all on my own. Sometimes we have to pick up another job just to make ends meet. So, I think that's something that needs to be implemented for everybody and stay as is." — Parent of elementary school student, Santa Barbara County

CONCLUSION

California's School Meals for All program provides meaningful financial relief to families across income levels. Nearly 4 in 5 California parents (**79%**) recognize that school meals save their family money, and more than half (**55%**) worry that ending the program would harm household finances. These benefits are not confined to low-income households; even among higher-income families not eligible for free or reduced-price meals, substantial majorities reported financial relief from SMFA.

"… the free meals, I think it's a good thing because a lot of people can't afford it. Food is expensive right now, really, really expensive. It's taken a toll on us as well. [...]So we do depend on the school's lunches as well." — Parent of high school student, Los Angeles County

References: [1] California Department of Education. California Universal Meals. Accessed April 15, 2026, https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/sn/cauniversalmeals.asp. [2] Food Research & Action Center. School Meal Eligibility and Reimbursements. Accessed April 15, 2026, https://frac.org/school-meal-eligibility-reimbursements.

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